DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 016 CS 204 698

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TITLE College Composition and the Invisible Handicap.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Programs; *Composition (Literary); *Handicapped; Higher Education; *Identification; Learning Difficulties; *Learning Disabilities; *Remedial Instruction; Teaching Methods; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

There are students who have "invisible handicaps" specific learning disabilities who need to be identified and given assistance. One such student was discovered in a freshman composition class because of the disparity between his in-class writing and his take-home writing. It was ascertained that he had a learning disability that made it difficult for him to manipulate symbols spatially. After completing an alternative course through a writing laboratory using "Process One, a College Writing Program," he was able to improve his skills to the point of earning a "C" grade. In working with students who have learning disabilities, some suggestions are: establish and publicize some system of referral and diagnosis, urge those who teach writing to support such a system, establish uniform standards throughout all departments offering waivers for specific learning disabilities, use the system often, provide a required program of special help, include audiovisual components in the supplementary writing program and use written exercises and objective tests to check mastery of principles, and give such students career guidance and personal counseling throughout their college years. (TJ)

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COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND THE INVISIBLE HANDICAP

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In 1970 Public Law 91-230 afforded physically disabled students greater access to classrooms in public schools. So we may, in the near future, expect more of the handicapped to enroll in colleges as well. Yet I fear that many of us have been overlooking students already in our classrooms who have invisible handicaps - learning disabilities - which too often remain undetected, even in mathematics, foreign languages and freshman English where they are most likely to cause severe problems in computing, reading and writing.

To illustrate the problems involved in identifying and in working with college students having learning disabilities I must describe in some detail my encounter with a student whom I shall call John. He was quieter than most of the others in freshman English, but always prompt in completing the assignments required: eight two or three-page themes and a research paper, in addition to the final essay examination. Through the first half of the semester John's grades were disturbing. When he received an initial "F" on an in-class theme because of grammar and mechanics (chiefly spelling, subject-verb agreement and punctuation), I arranged to meet John in my office and soon saw that his writing gave little indication of his mental facility in conversation.

When John received a "B" on his next paper I was not too surprised because I had given him exercises to correct the mechanical deficiencies, and he impressed me as being conscientious about mastering the principles involved. Moreover, the second theme was written out-of-class, which would have allowed John all the time he needed to proofread and to put into practice by means of revision whatever he learned. An "F" on his third theme (in class) supported

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my theory that John needed more time to correct the errors which he was only now beginning to discover and correct.

But his fourth paper was out-of-class and I still had to fail it for the same writing errors that had invalidated all of John's earlier in-class work. So now that "B" on his second out-of-class theme was a conspicuous exception to a series of unacceptable papers written both in and out of class. Had someone else written or rewritten the paper for him? We had a long office session during which I probed John's working habits and attitudes and asked to see his revisions, warning him that his midterm grade would have to be an "F."

At this point it all came out. John reported that he had received psychological counseling throughout elementary school for a learning disability which had then gone undetected in high school. This, plus the fact that his father had become a doctor, even though he had also been diagnosed as having a specific learning disability, gave John good reason to hope that he too could do well enough in college to qualify for medical school. He admitted that he had spent thirteen hours preparing the two-page paper on which he received a "B." But, by the time of the next out-of-class theme nearly half-way through the semester, John realized that he could no longer devote so much time to getting a "C" at best in English and still make the necessary "A's" in his science courses so as to remain eligible for medical school.

Some time ago we had been warned in a faculty meeting that any student whom we suspected of having specific learning disabilities should be referred to the psychology department for testing. Thus I had been prepared in advance to regard the term "learning disability" not as a psychological euphemism for intractable ignorance but as a reference to an array of specific disorders that could be diagnosed and perhaps even treated. After several conferences about John with Matthew Jaremko, in our psychology department, I found out about Public Law 91-230 in terms of its definition of a specific learning disability:

> a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such disorders include such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include ... learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental disadvantage.
>
> (Public Law 91-230, Title VI, Sec. 602 (15), 1970)

If I had not observed John and his work I should still have had difficulty interpreting such abstract terminology as "basic psychological processes." John's customary reticence concealed his ability to express himself until I called him in for office conferences and began calling on him in class, even though he did not often volunteer. The disparity revealed between his capacity to understand and to respond orally and his ability to write was confirmed by psychological tests which indicated that John's greatest strength was conceptualization and his greatest weakness spatial orientation and sequencing. Evidently John could process symbols efficiently only so long as they remained abstract (as in mathematics), or so long as he did not have to manipulate them spatially (writing words out as opposed to using them in thought or speech).

Of course, John was not the first student at the University of Richmond to be identified as having a specific learning disability which required special attention. An administrative mechanism already existed whereby students who had been diagnosed as having specific learning disabilities could be granted exemption from certain courses upon approval by a Waiver Committee composed of the appropriate college dean and the chairmen of those departments which offered waivers. But freshman English was not subject to such an exemption because it is required of all students (except for the few who gain exemption by passing a proficiency examination). So, even though

John was now officially acknowledged by the University as having a handicap which would prohibit equal participation with others taking freshman English, he was still required to pass it on their terms.

For me this dilemma had personal as well as institutional implications. I could set different standards for John by giving him fewer themes, thereby allowing him more time to write out-of-class. Or I could eliminate all in-class writing and give him a take-home final examination to write, or perhaps even examine him orally. But I regarded that as an early admission of defeat alien to John's hopeful desire of competing equitably and overcoming the odds against him. Practically considered, my establishment of a double standard in writing for John would also make him susceptible to possible failure in other humanities courses depending heavily upon written work. Even when, by virtue of superior work in the sciences, John did graduate without being able to write three sentences without some obvious error, both he and the University would be subject to external criticism. For this handicap of a specific learning disability <u>is</u> invisible; and John would understandably try to keep it so when confronted by a graduate school or some future employer. The widespread dismay among the public (including our own faculty) over a general decline in writing skills would inevitably conflict with whatever allowances I might make for John's particular disability. And this same pressure would make it impossible for me to obtain for John the same exemption from freshman English which other students with specific learning disabilities had received from courses in mathematics and in foreign languages.

As a compromise between complete exemption and total failure through strict grading, I petitioned to allow John to take his year of English on a pass/fail basis. Since no other students were permitted to take such a required course pass/fail, I thought this might enable those within the University to identify students diagnosed as having specific learning disabilities without disclosing

that information to outsiders who might also be examining academic transcripts. Eventually, however, my petition to make John's grade pass/fail was refused, probably for the same reason that had made complete exemption unacceptable from the beginning: our faculty (like many others) would set no precedent for the relaxation of writing standards, no matter what the individual circumstances might be. So I decided to give John an "Incomplete," devise my own supplementary writing prograr and grade him on that.

At this time I had also been planning the establishment of a writing laboratory at the University of Richmond. In the course of reviewing materials for this I found one program - consisting of a textbook, film strips and cassettes - that could serve as a supplement to both semesters of freshman English because it comprised a full year of study in composition at the college level: George R. Bramer, with Dorothy Sedley, Process One, A College Writing Program (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1977). The price for the 15 cassettes and filmstrips which accompanied the textbook was about $500.00 so I applied to our Faculty Research Committee for a grant to cover that. After receiving it I devised a program with Process One to supplement freshman English, working together with Matthew Jaremko, the psychologist who had originally diagnosed John's learning disability. He was to supervise John while I would work with a student whom I shall call Michael. Michael had written such a poor final examination in the second semester after performing uncertainly throughout freshman English that I gave him an "Incomplete" also, with a chance to earn a better grade by taking Process One, as John was doing.

I also added two of my "B" students who wanted to write "A" compositions, one a freshman and the other a junior. With these others to act as "controls," we felt we could compare John's progress in the multi-media writing program with

that of a variety of students who had no learning disabilities. For each we would use the same procedures: 1) reading a chapter, 2) outlining it, 3) watching the filmstrip and listening to the cassette soundtrack which corresponded to that chapter, 4) writing out the answers to exercises in the chapter, and 5) taking a posttest on the chapter. The idea, especially with respect to John, was to supplement the usual silent reading process with other activities requiring different kinds of attention and involvement: visual, both passive (in reading) and active (in the graphics of the filmstrip, as opposed to the more abstract symbols of letters and words in reading), auditory (the cassette soundtrack accompanying the filmstrip), and motor (writing outlines on the material being read, seen and heard.)

Of course, the actual operation of Process One in the second semester did not work so smoothly as its theory and planning had during the first. The two "B" students were not conscientious about using the audio-visual complements to the text; and by mid-semester they had both dropped out of the program completely, wishing to devote all their time to courses which "counted" in terms of their cumulative averages. So our control group was reduced to Michael, the student who, like John himself, had an "Incomplete" to resolve in freshman English.

Even without the others, John and Michael offered striking comparisons and contrasts with each other. In order to assess their strengths and weaknesses in all the chapters of Process One, we gave John and Michael pretests covering the two major subdivisions of the text, rhetoric ("Effective Writing") and grammar ("Conventional Writing"). Both students were already close to passing (more than 70 per cent of the recommended 80 per cent) on principles of rhetoric. But deficiencies in the fundamentals of grammar and mechanics (more than 20 per cent below their average scores in rhetoric) were undermining whatever conceptual skills of organization John and Michael might have been developing and exercising in freshman composition.

In spelling both John and Michael scored 20 to 30 per cent below their scores on other chapters of Process One. For spelling, therefore, we could not follow the author's recommendation as we did with the other chapters: to have a student repeat a given chapter until he scored at least 80 per cent on the posttest accompanying it. Considering John's learning disability, we never expected to reach 80 per cent to indicate a mastery of spelling: instead, we simply decided to introduce that chapter early and often for gradual improvement.

With the other chapters we tried to adopt patterns of timing and sequence to accommodate each student's individual temperament and his performance on the Process One pretest. In view of John's motivation and his intellectual potential, Matthew Jaremko required him to take 10 of the 15 Process One chapters, including both grammar and rhetoric. But due to my more modest assessment of Michael's interest and capacities, I selected only the five chapters on which he made the lowest scores in the pretests. This would enable Michael to take each chapter a subdivision at a time, doing the exercises, grading them himself and going over the results with me before proceeding.

Even though they were working through the Bramer Process One program in different chapter sequences and at different speeds, John and Michael arrived independently at the same pattern of study: reading the subdivision of a chapter, attempting the exercises on that subdivision and then, if the exercises did not go well, viewing the part of the cassette-filmstrip which covered that section of the chapter. So long as the exercises for each subdivision were acceptable, they would reserve the cassette-filmstrip to use in reviewing the entire chapter before taking a posttest on it. John and Michael were both required to try other methods, such as using the cassette-filmstrip without the text or as an introduction to it. But they felt more comfortable

and confident being exposed to the fuller treatment of the text first, knowing that they could then follow that up with the cassette-filmstrip to review the highlights of a chapter on grammar or punctuation.

What, then, were the results of this semester-long supplementary program? In the rhetorical chapters of Process One where John had already averaged 70 per cent on the pretest, he only raised that total a few percentage points. But in the chapters on grammar and mechanics where John had averaged only 55 per cent on the pretest (and which therefore received the most emphasis), John raised his average to 70. Even in the chapter on spelling, which kept John's overall average in grammar from reaching the 80 per cent criterion recommended for mastery, he nearly doubled his test percentage, from 28 to 43. Michael, having concentrated only on the chapters covering grammar and mechanics, raised his average score from 55 per cent on the pretest to approximately the required 80 per cent on the posttest.

But of course these gains in percentages merely represent an improved ability to answer questions about grammatical or rhetorical principles of writing. To correlate this with the writing process itself Process One's authors recommend that the activities of reading the chapters, doing the exercises and taking the posttests all be interspersed with frequent writing assignments rather similar to the 8 themes which John and Michael had already written in their first semester of freshman English. Since this was a course supplementary to that one, and the students were already taking full course loads in all subjects (including 8 more themes in the second semester of English composition), Matthew Jaremko and I agreed to use only 1 entry and 1 exit theme comparable to the Process One pretest and posttest. Before beginning Process One we asked John and Michael to write themes on questions from previous freshman exemption/placement examinations. We then asked 3 members of the English department to read these

compositions, assigning them letter grades. The same 3 members of the department also read the themes written after Process One without knowing which student wrote what theme, or even that the same students had written both sets. The grades showed that even a significant increase in test scores on Process One might not produce a corresponding improvement in actual writing skills. Despite his learning disability, John seemed able to improve his writing while increasing his knowledge of the principles on which he was tested in the supplementary program. He translated a 20 per cent improvement in Process One test scores into a 12.5 per cent gain in writing (or an increase of half a letter grade.) On the 4.0 scale this would be an increase from .9 on John's theme before taking the program to 1.4 on his theme written afterward. Yet Michael, who had registered a 25 per cent gain in Process One scores, improved on his writing only 5 per cent, from 1.1 to 1.3 in the grading of his written work.

In spelling, the area where both John and Michael were weakest, John also appeared to improve more. To determine whether there was any correlation between the spelling test scores for Process One and the ability to spell while writing, I devised a paragraph full of spelling errors which I had culled from past papers of John, Michael and other freshmen. Once John and Michael had completed the chapter on spelling in Process One, I gave them 20 minutes to copy my misspelled paragraph, making all the corrections they could in their own handwriting without using a dictionary. Michael, who scored above 80 per cent on the Process One posttest after one reading of the spelling chapter, misspelled 45 of the 80 words already misspelled in my paragraph, or 22 per cent of the 199 words which he was copying. But John - who had to read the text, hear and view the filmstrip, and take the posttest twice to reach 78 per cent on the spelling chapter - misspelled 35 of the 80 words already misspelled in my paragraph, or 17 per cent of the total.

Despite his specific learning disability, why was John better able than Michael to apply what he had learned from Process One to his own writing? My guess is that Michael too had a specific learning disability, but one that was more elusive than John's. Could I begin again, of course I would refer Michael to the psychology department for diagnosis also. But now that Michael has his "D" for a year of freshman English, and now that he has merely performed marginally on the only supplementary program available (he was taking the second semester of freshman English concurrently with Process One), would it help him to tell him (after more tests) that he has something called a learning disability? Even as he was about to tell Oedipus the truth which Oedipus would have to discover for himself, Teiresias observed: "How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be when there's no help in truth ... I should not have come" (Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, 1,319-21, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald).

Of course, our sympathies are with Oedipus not Teiresias. In a university, as nowhere else, we surely have the opportunity as well as the obligation to seek the truth, despite the possibility of painful consequences. Yet in this case I would argue that there may be no clear-cut truth to be found. I did not assign Michael most of Process One, even though John was doing it, because I felt, after observing him in freshman English, that his attitude toward writing and his motivation to improve it was dutifully average at best. In fact he only completed the 5 chapters I assigned him out of the total of 15 by readjusting our original schedule since he was not always ready to take a post-test with his written intermediate exercises complete. Moreover, the log for our Learning Resources Center shows that he was not nearly so conscientious about using the cassette-filmstrips as John was. Lacking John's clearly defined model and career goal (his father's becoming a doctor despite a learning disability), Michael had come to accept the fact that he was likely to

misspell a word for every few lines that he wrote, no matter what. By the time that he reached college, Michael had no doubt become accustomed (consciously or unconsciously) to divert much of his energy toward social activities, which he understandably found more rewarding. In my composition class therefore I never saw in Michael the sharp disparity between intellectual potential and performance that seemed so evident in John. Even if he had been tested, I suspect that Michael would have been characterized as a borderline case, a student with a marginal learning disability at most.

From my experience with John and Michael I would offer the following suggestions for those in other schools who might wish to locate and to help students in college whom you suspect may have learning disabilities:

1. ESTABLISH AND PUBLICIZE SOME SYSTEM OF REFERRAL AND DIAGNOSIS.

This may involve education, psychology and English, or any other department offering courses in remedial writing or in English as a second language.

2. URGE THOSE WHO TEACH WRITING TO SUPPORT SUCH A SYSTEM OF REFERRAL AND DIAGNOSIS.

Ask members of the English department to schedule approximately half of their themes to be written in class. This not only provides some control over the possibility of plagiarism on out-of-class assignments but it also prepares students for writing under the sort of time limit which they must face in other classes on written quizzes and final examinations. Of course, such writing done in class also helps to locate students with specific learning disabilities; if I had not noticed the sharp disparity between John's writing in class and out, I might never have realized that he needed special help.

3. ESTABLISH UNIFORM STANDARDS THROUGHOUT ALL DEPARTMENTS OFFERING WAIVERS FOR SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES.

Since Public Law 91-230, Title VI implies that educational institutions have an obligation to meet the needs of the handicapped, public schools could be legally required to provide supplementary programs. This may not have been tested yet with respect to learning disabilities in college students. But, regardless of the legalities involved, college teachers will surely feel an ethical responsibility to provide extra help for a student who demonstrates promising intellectual potential in general, even though he has not yet mastered some specific fundamental skills in languages or mathematics. In the University of Richmond at present mathematics grants waivers with recommendations of supplementary instruction in a laboratory, foreign language simply provides exemption and English makes a waiver contingent upon supplementary programs like Process One. What is not yet clear is whether exemption from required courses like freshman composition should be automatic upon completion of a

supplementary program or contingent upon a student's improvement in writing skills as a result of that program.

4. WHATEVER SYSTEM YOU ESTABLISH, USE IT OFTEN.

When any teacher even suspects the presence of a specific learning disability, urge him to have the student diagnosed. A system for the referral and diagnosis of learning disabilities can best establish itself among the faculty through wide usage and frequent rejection of students not qualified, a process which validates the system's selectivity. The fact that John was the first referral from a freshman English course worked against him since he had not been selected from a pool of applicants including the lazy, the disinterested, athletes urged on by coaches, malcontents self-righteously seeking loopholes as a means of protest against required courses: the whole spectrum of opportunists whom faculty (sometimes justly) suppose are waiting to take advantage of any attempt to make "standards" more flexible.

5. SUPPORT YOUR SYSTEM OF DIAGNOSIS WITH A REQUIRED PROGRAM OF SPECIAL HELP TO MEET EACH STUDENT'S PARTICULAR NEEDS.

All of the students who had no "Incomplete" hanging over them failed to complete Process One. John himself, despite his excellent motivation, soon realized that he could not continue to take the time necessary for him to write "B" papers and still maintain a high average in the sciences. Thus, only the prospect of my converting his "Incomplete" to a failing grade in freshman English would have deterred him from cutting corners while completing Process One. If you do choose to employ a grade of "Incomplete" in this manner, however, you ought to check with your registrar to see whether the grade will be computed as an "F" in the cumulative average. If so, you could be denying the student with learning disabilities access to social and academic societies, or even jeopardizing his chances in early contacts with employers or graduate and professional schools. (This is the subject of a petition which I am currently circulating: to establish a non-punitive grade of "Incomplete" for students who, in the judgment of their teachers, deserve to have it).

6. WHATEVER FORMAT YOU USE FOR A SUPPLEMENTARY WRITING PROGRAM, INCLUDE AUDIO-VISUAL COMPONENTS AND CO-ORDINATE THEMES AND SHORTER WRITTEN EXERCISES WITH OBJECTIVE TESTS CHECKING MASTERY OF PRINCIPLES.

Even though Michael improved enough to satisfy criteria for mastery on the post-tests of Process One, his compositional skills did not show a corresponding improvement; and, since those writing skills were the object of the supplementary program, Michael therefore received no more than the grade of "D" to which he was already entitled in freshman composition. John's more modest (though significant) gains in Process One were accompanied by appropriate improvements in writing skills so he was rewarded accordingly: a "C" instead of an "F" in the first semester of freshman English and an exemption from the second semester since (for John, if not for Michael) Process One had turned out to be more useful and appropriate.

7. ONCE STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES ARE IDENTIFIED AND DIAGNOSED, GIVE THEM CAREER GUIDANCE AND PERSONAL COUNSELING THROUGHOUT THEIR COLLEGE YEARS.

Fortunately, John chose to emulate his father in pursuing medicine, where his weakness in writing was not likely to impede his training. But what if he had had

ambitions of becoming a lawyer instead? To avoid false expectations it might even be necessary or desirable in some cases to discuss with a prospective employer a particular student's strengths and weaknesses in terms of his learning disability.

When I discussed this Process One project at the 1978 Conference on College Composition and Communication, several teachers who specialized in working with the handicapped were amazed at the time which Matthew Jaremko and I devoted to spelling. Evidently they had been schooled to accept this deficiency, for their best advice was to tell John to marry a secretary so that he would always have someone to process his business letters and to proof-read his letters at home. Such practical considerations do make one fatalistic. Despite John's considerable improvement, I must admit he is likely to find that his spelling alone is enough to stigmatize him socially. As teachers of college English, who should know better than we that the national average toward which John is improving is in itself scandalously low?

Nevertheless John did improve, and his own assessment of our work makes it worthwhile: it gave him self-confidence. What haunts me are the Michaels, those students grimly engaged in the humiliating struggle to get from an "F" to a "D" throughout a year of freshman English. Where specific learning disabilities and college compositions are concerned, what if Michael should prove to be the rule and John the exception? Long before I had ever heard of a specific learning disability, in working with such students I often thought that, on technical grounds at least, their writing might never amount to more than a "D" (if that much), no matter what we tried. And now I know just enough about learning disabilities to wonder whether I caught this sense of hopelessness from them, those college students who need no psychological tests to tell them that they are the invisibly handicapped.